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The Vietnamese Family in Change. The case of the Red River Delta. By Pham Van Bich. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Vietnam in Transition series. Richmond: Curzon, 1999. pp. 270. Bibliography, Index.

L.Schenk-Sandbergen

The study is about the family and its changes over 50 years (1945-95) in a northern part of Vietnam (Red River Delta). The author should be complimented with this respectful and impressive work. The book is the result of the reworking of his doctoral dissertation at the Department of Sociology, University of Goteborg, Sweden. The material in the book is not based on anthropological fieldwork but on a wealth of literature. It is amazing, that so many studies on the Vietnamese family, covering a timespan of roughly the last half century, have been conducted and published. What is of specific value is that the author could use all kind of sources in Vietnamese and open up the findings to the wider world. Particularly his quotations from Vietnamese novels are very vivid and interesting illustrations of the topics under discussion.

The book is a comprehensive and rich scholarly work, a milestone, which reminds me of almost forgotten classics on family life in China, such as, Olga Lang (*Chinese Family and Society* 1946), or Elisabeth Croll (*The Politics of Marriage in contemporary China*, 1981). It contributes highly to a deeper understanding of the changes of the Vietnamese family. An important quality of the book is also the comparative perspective in terms of contrasts between Western individualism and Vietnamese collective family values.

Moreover, it contributes significantly to gender studies. What struck me the most is, that the book is conceptualised from a real, deeply rooted feminist perspective. Not a liberal, harsh or dogmatic feminism, but rather a kind of sensitive feminism which is present at all levels and dimensions of the analysis. If I had not known that the author is a man, I certainly had thought that the book had been written by a woman.

In Chapter one the traditional family is described and the French influence analysed. In particular the emergence of two new social categories in urban areas: the middle and the working class, formed new styles of family life. Rightly, the author presents fundamental characteristics of the traditional family, which still count for the 'modern' family as well; such as the collective community, hierarchy of sexes and ages, patrilineal family, patrilocal post-marriage residence pattern and its variant: gender separation, and women's status (division of labour, spatial segregation). The background of the patrilocal residence pattern is explained by focusing on the meaning and role of ancestor-worship. In the French period commerce was considered as unworthy for men's respect. Women were in charge of the marketplace and brought their families a significant amount of cash income (p.33). But, this did not bestow them with prestige and power.

In the second Chapter the social changes affecting the family in the period 1945-95 are shown. Firstly a number of crucial state planned policies and interferences are analysed, as ideological campaigns, laws on marriage and the family, women's liberation movement, class struggle approach during land reform 1953-56 and its

disastrous effect when it came to children's denunciation of parents (p.72). The study shows that women generally benefited greatly from collectivization in this period. The neglect of buffaloes shows the disadvantage of cooperatives. It is remarkable that the same buffalo story was told to me by several people in Lao PDR. Policies of industrialization, household registration and housing policies had a strong impact on living and working conditions of the family members. The Delta was a battlefield in the wars against the French and the American air forces. Families suffered also from heavy losses of life among the soldiers born in the Red River Delta area in the Cambodian (1978-91) and the Chinese border war (1979). Population imbalance between men and women had wide consequences and created families of single mothers: unacceptable in the traditional family (p.87). But, recently the official policy towards single mothers has changed dramatically. Unmarried women are allowed to have a child after a brief affair with a married man. Children bear the mother's family name and these families follow a matrilineal system.

In 1986 the government launched its economic reform programme, known as *doi moi* (renovation), towards a market-led economy. Agricultural, industrial and cultural reforms followed and had deep implications for marital and family relations.

The husband-wife relationship stands central in Chapter three. Crucial themes are discussed, such as spouse selection, expectations of brides, reasons for divorce in the traditional family. In the part on the conjugal bonds in the present family the focus is on marital partner selection and interaction at work, in free time, in family decision-making, sexuality and divorce. Political and the family background criteria are less important than previously in the choice of a partner. The changes in the classic problematic relation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is indicated. The parent-child ties still remain dominant. The 'empty nest' concept is quite alien to many Vietnamese families as grandparents, in particular grandmothers, care for young grandchildren (p.174). It is pointed out that there is a special Vietnamese family type in which spouses live separately for a long time for occupational reasons. One of the conclusions of this chapter is that marriage still serves mainly the interests of groups, not individuals (p.177).

Reproduction and its socio-cultural meaning in the traditional and present family are central issues in Chapter four. There is a strong desire among almost all couples to have children. A woman without a child feels like 'a failure as a woman' (p.186). Preference for a son is very strong and many women still feel ashamed and guilty for not giving birth to a son. Traditionally, women were blamed for not having a son. The traditional proverb speaks for itself. 'If you have a son, you can say you have a descendant; but you cannot say this, even if you have ten daughters' (p.190). The economic value of sons, care for old parents and the son's crucial role in ancestor worship still motivate the strive for a son. The author states that ancestor worship does not undergo secularisation. On the contrary, improved living standards and social status, imply more means to remember ancestors. In late 1988 the Vietnamese government specified financial and work penalties for couples who had more than two children. The implementation of these compulsory measures varies from place to place, but it is quite common in many places. The negative effects of birth control for women are discussed and confirm the findings of Tine Gammeltoft (*Women's Bodies, Women's Worries*, Curzon, 1999). Very alarming is that recent abortion rates have increased dramatically. A survey predicts that if this trend continues, there will be twice as many abortions as births in the near future (p.193).

For substantial groups of women having an abortion was an alternative method of birth-control. The burden of having smaller families is borne mainly by women and is not merely a technical, medical or economic problem, but also a socio-cultural one.

The conclusion contains the role of the State in changing family patterns, hierarchy, the limits of family change and the Confucian legacy plus Marxist bias on the gender issue. The first conclusion of the author is (p.236) that, 'it is undeniable that the state has played an enormous role in changing the family patterns'. The direction of change within the family is remarkable. Today freedom in marital partner selection has become a reality for a wide range of young people. Women's status has improved significantly both inside and outside the family. In urban areas there is more freedom to choose a marriage partner. This has strengthened the conjugal ties and has placed the partners on a more equal footing. Nevertheless, the second conclusion of the author is that, 'although the idea of social equality is put forward in some respects, the traditions of hierarchy still continue unabated (p.239)'. In his third conclusion he points to the narrow understanding of the concept of gender equality in Vietnamese society. He states: 'to achieve it in a Confucian society that has adopted Marxism, as Vietnam has done, requires a redoubled effort' (p.245). The birth control programme has reduced the number of children. In Vietnam family changes can hardly be attributed to industrialization as it has been stated in western sociological studies.

The fourth and last conclusion is: 'the more the families improve their standards of living due to the present renovation policy, the more independently they can build up their family life: restoring traditions, absorbing some Western influence, or adopting some combination of both' (p.252).

A small remark is that I miss a reference of the book edited by Rita Liljestrom and Tuong Lai (Sociological Studies on the Vietnamese Family. Hanoi 1991). And it is a pity that the author was not aware of the study of Li Thi Nham Tuyet and me on rural women in the Red River Delta (Gender, Water Management and Economic Transformation, Hanoi 1996), in which the link between the environmental context of the Red River Delta: floods, droughts, irrigation water management, and feminisation of agriculture and male migration is emphasized. This link is missing in Pham Van Bich's book. However, this is a minor criticism. The book deserves to be read all over the world by people interested in changing family relations and gender studies. The book is a laudable example of a study to be followed in many other countries.